

Irving Kristol

Irving Kristol, who died on September 18 aged 89, was a Depression-era American student radical turned reactionary, and was often described as the "godfather" of the American neoconservative movement; many credited him with helping to transform the political landscape of the United States in the late 20th century.



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The husband of the historian and social commentator Gertrude Himmelfarb, Kristol founded and edited *The Public Interest*, one of the first publications to seek to articulate a positive conservative philosophy of culture, religion and "values", as opposed to mere negative hostility to New Deal liberalism. His aim was "to convert the Republican Party, and American conservatism in general, against their respective wills, into a new kind of conservative politics suitable to governing a modern democracy".

Kristol used *The Public Interest* to press for low taxes, a well-funded military, conservative social policies and a minimalist interpretation of First Amendment rights. Though much of the magazine's impact was the result of its influence on young bloods at the *Wall Street Journal*, to which Kristol was a regular contributor, he was instrumental in nurturing writers who shared the same anti-liberal establishment ethos as he did.

Angered by the rise of the counterculture and by the "appeasement" politics of the Democratic Party in the early 1970s, Kristol and his troops blazed a political trail from left to right. They were, he claimed "liberals mugged by reality".

Kristol once wrote that neoconservatism was less a specific policy agenda than a cast of mind – a "moving spirit" which promoted the idea of an activist agenda within Republican political thinking. Indeed, his own agenda was marked by some startling U-turns.

While in the 1950s he favourably contrasted the secularism of the West with the religious impulse at work in fascism or communism, and even made wisecracks about the Holy Trinity, by the 1980s, with the rise of the religious Right, he was arguing that the humanist secularism which had been such a bulwark against communism had become the slippery slope to liberalism and socialism.

During the 1980s the rather subjective quality of the neocon agenda was reflected in an oft-quoted remark: "If Irving Kristol says you're a neoconservative, you are."

Kristol also played an important role in shaping neoconservative links with the world of think tanks and pressure groups. He had a long association with the American Enterprise Institute and played a pivotal role in the recruitment of intellectuals and academics into the neoconservative movement, acting as a broker between conservative funding sources and Washington-based think tanks. His son William would become chairman of the neocon Project for the New American Century.

But Kristol's radicalism was moderated by realism about the limits of America's cultural hegemony. Although a fierce anti-communist during the Cold War, when it ended he did not entirely share the crusading zeal of the many fellow neocons who argued that America should be building on its triumph by imposing American values on the rest of mankind – though he recognised that the proposition held a strong appeal to people who found themselves "ideologically adrift in the post-Cold War era".

For hardliners, Kristol's scepticism meant that he had forfeited the right to be called a neoconservative, and some accused him of being a conservative neo-realist or Right isolationist. In any case, by the time of the election of George W Bush the initiative had passed to a new generation of neocons, a "Young Turk" faction which included Kristol's son William, which would lead efforts after 9/11 to push for war in Iraq and an interventionist "war on terror".

"Ever since I can remember, I've been a neo-something," Kristol reflected. "A neo-Marxist, a neo-Trotskyist, a neo-liberal, a neo-conservative; in religion, a neo-orthodox even while I was a neo-Trotskyist and a neo-Marxist. I'm going to end up a neo-. That's all, neo dash nothing."

Irving Kristol was born on January 22 1920 into a poor Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, where his father worked in the rag trade. He studied History at the City College of New York, then a hotbed of Left-wing radicalism. The various warring factions occupied different alcoves off the main university dining hall, and Kristol chose the Trotskyist alcove. He was a member of the 4th International in 1940 and it was at a Trotskyist meeting that he met Gertrude Himmelfarb. They married in 1942.

Trotsky's critique of the Soviet Union would help Kristol to abandon an early flirtation with Marxism, and he retained at least one important lesson from his erstwhile mentor: the belief that it is necessary to have "permanent revolution" to sustain an activist ideology.

Moreover, although Kristol later described the job of the neocon as being "to explain to the American people why they are right and to the intellectuals why they are wrong", his basic outlook owed much to Trotskyist concept of the intellectual elite: "The changing connotation of the term 'alienated' tells us much," he wrote later. "At City College in the 1930s... it was a sociological category and referred to the condition of the working class. We were not alienated. By virtue of being radical intellectuals, we had 'transcended'. We experienced our radicalism as a privilege of rank, not as a burden imposed by a malignant fate. It would never have occurred to us to denounce anyone or anything as 'elitist'. The elite was us – the 'happy few' who had been chosen by History to guide our fellow creatures toward a secular redemption..."

From 1941 to 1944, Kristol served as staff sergeant in the armoured infantry in Europe. After the war he was stationed in Marseilles for a year, first at an Army headquarters library and then as chief company clerk.

Back in America in 1947, he was appointed managing editor of *Commentary*, a monthly political and cultural magazine that had been founded by the American Jewish Committee two years earlier. Kristol's path from radical leftist, to liberal, to neoconservative, took place during his time as editor in the early 1950s, and he displayed all the zeal of the convert.

Among his favourite targets for criticism were "progressives" who, he claimed, were abetting communist influence in the United States.

In a 1952 article, "'Civil Liberties' –A Study in Confusion", Kristol criticised those who defended the civil liberties of communists, arguing that to accord such people rights was like a businessman paying "a handsome salary to someone pledged to his liquidation".

In 1953 he co-founded, with Stephen Spender, the Anglo-American literary magazine *Encounter*, serving as its co-editor until 1958. The magazine was later revealed to have received covert funding from the CIA, a fact of which Spender, at least, had been unaware. Kristol too denied all knowledge.

Kristol used *Encounter* to campaign for pro-American, anti-communist politics among social democratic intellectuals in Europe. In 1956 he rejected for publication an essay by Michael Oakeshott called "On Being Conservative" on the ground, as he later explained, that Oakeshott's theory of restrained, small-government conservatism would never be accepted in the United States because it was "irredeemably secular" and therefore "at odds with the ideological, 'creedal' mentality of Americans".

In 1959-60 Kristol was editor of *The Reporter*, a biweekly news and comment magazine published in New York. He served as vice-president of Basic Books, a New York publishing house, from 1961 to 1969, when he was appointed Professor of Social Thought at the New York University Graduate School of Business.

Kristol founded *The Public Interest* in 1965, co-editing it with Daniel Bell and later Nathan Glazer. In 1985 he established an international affairs version entitled *The National Interest*, which he published until 2001.

In the late 1970s Kristol claimed credit for converting (albeit indirectly) Ronald Reagan to supply-side economics, and in 1979 an article he wrote about a "conservative welfare state" which would protect the "innocent" poor but would not provide for the chronically idle, set the agenda for a new Republican approach to welfare reform.

During the 1980s his favourite target for criticism was what he called the "New Class" of white-collar professionals – scientists, lawyers, planners, social workers, educationalists, criminologists, sociologists and the like – whose hidden agenda, he maintained, was to propel the nation toward an economic system "so stringently regulated in detail as to fulfil many of the traditional anti-capitalist aspirations of the Left".

Kristol became a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and of the *Wall Street Journal* Board of Contributors in 1972, and in 1988 he was appointed a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. In 2002 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by George W Bush.

His books include *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (1978), *Reflections of a Neo-conservative* (1983) and *Neo-conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (1995).

Irving Kristol is survived by his wife and their son and daughter. Their son, William, who now edits the neocon *Weekly Standard*, declared after the inauguration of President Barack Obama: "All good things must come to an end. January 20 2009 marked the end of a conservative era."



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